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THE HIGH-SCHOOL PAPER—ITS STATUS AND ITS POSSIBILITIES

THE high-school paper is in most high schools an annoying puzzle to the principal. Its student proprietors, for the year they are in charge, enthusiastically and persistently urge its claims. The stock arguments for it are: (1) It is a stimulus to literary composition. (2) It is a fine advertisement for the high school. (3) It increases school spirit among pupils.

The literary claim.—I have been interested during the last year to compare the distinctly literary pages in some high-school papers with those given over to other matter, and the fact appeared that the proportion of miscellaneous matter to that labeled "literary" was greater than the famous 16 to 1. But of more significance than this was the other fact which appeared, that the one or two pages thus dedicated to literature were not infrequently innocent of their baptism. It was to be expected that high-school literature would not attain the merits of matured composition, but this "literature" did not bear the marks of high attempt; its *aim* was trivial; it was not a matter of *degree* in approaching the literary ideal—it was a difference in *kind*, a difference in the ideal itself. Not only were the aims of these articles trivial, but the style was a deliberate imitation of the flashy story—a far remove from the results sought by the teacher of English. Here is a condition for high-school teachers to contemplate: installed in most of the high schools of the land is an English ideal at positive variance with that of the English department of the high school.

If the uninitiated should ask why it is the teacher of English does not control the product which of all others ought to represent the teaching of English in the school, he would probably be told, and with some reason, that the teacher of English is kept too busy now with her own papers for correction; and, moreover, censorship under student control, is a thankless task and provocative of unpleasant clashes.

Very frequently some of the other other matter in the paper, as a report of a lecture or the description of local improvements, was far superior in literary quality to the articles especially labeled "literature"—another evidence that the term "literature" is woefully misconceived by the average high-school paper under student control.

The advertising claim.—The second contention, namely, that the paper is a fine advertisement for the school, is as much a mistake as the literary argument. Like the freak college annuals, high-school papers are the only "official" publications many people meet with emanating from the school, and like the annuals, they are naturally taken as broadly representative of the school. These people think the real work of the school appears in the high-school paper, and teachers and pupils alike are judged by what appears in its columns.

This is not a very pleasant reflection to school authorities, for the table of contents of such a paper represents everything else but the serious and regular work of the school. Editorials are composed mostly of flippant observations on matters and things in general, and flamboyant appeals for the support of athletics—items which the rushed and inspired editor can dash off in a minute or two. A few student communications on matters of like import with sundry personal allusions serve to make out another page; jokes and poems, original and selected, do duty for another page. But the *piece de resistance*, the part that everyone most eagerly scans, is the "Locals," or "Personals," or "About Ourselves," "Reporters' Gossip," as the case may be, which wounds or flatters in nearly every line the vanities of half the school, interspersing sundry remarks—good humored or otherwise—about the teachers.

Social doings are very fully recorded, and the latest dance—frequently a purely private affair and participated in by a few pupils—is written up to a degree of exaggeration, and that issue gives the public a totally wrong impression of the relative amount of time and attention given to dancing in the high school. The high school needs to be delivered from such advertising.

In most of these papers which have come into my hands, the editors rely upon some teacher for the only serious article in the paper. This secures the reluctant good will of the teacher, and since few students read these serious articles, they do not materially interfere with the purposes of the publication. Week in and week out teachers and pupils toil and struggle at the real work of education and yet one looks in vain for news of the substantial school work in the student publication. Some parents who have children in the high school may perhaps hear of this serious work going on, but they form a very small percentage of the community at large—and the bulk of the community is left to the high-school paper to form its opinion of high-school work. That opinion is not likely to be a very high one, and the impression gains ground that the high school is a place of frivolity scarcely worth the taxes wrung from the industrious members of the town. The views of the principal or superintendent upon vital school measures are seldom seen.

Another species of evil advertising is done by these papers. Their financial management is proverbially bad; the paper fails every few years, and as often as these embarrassing occasions occur so often do its friends importune local merchants for advertisements and subscriptions to set it on its feet again. The wonder is so many respond; they do it, not for the sake of the periodical, but to show their good will to the high school in general. It is unfortunate that financial aid which might go into more useful channels for the high school is diverted to this costly folly. Giving to school interests is very much like giving to church. Men give a certain sum for conscience's sake and that suffices. Citizens who have contributed liberally to the school paper let that stand for their interest in education, and the library, manual training plant, school decorations, lecture courses, etc., must suffer accordingly. Moreover, the disappointing results that appear as the fruit of their educational investment constitute a distinct discouragement to future efforts for the support of the more substantial interests of education.

The school spirit claim—High-school pupils are not yet at an age where their estimate of values should determine school

enterprises. To them a handsomely executed sheet enclosed in a flaming color is an indication of "spirit" in the school. The bustle and talk and rush involved in its preparation is evidence to them that "things are moving," and a high school without this form of excitement is "dead." There is no question that the high-school paper distorts their view of school activities and consumes time and energy with no compensating advantages. It is nearly always a serious interference to the scholarship of the group of pupils who have linked their fortunes with it. The experience and novelty are sufficient to absorb a degree of time and effort for the publication which must come from their studies proper. Not a few petty jealousies, heartaches, and estrangements have their origin in the careless personals. On the whole the school spirit thus cultivated is of doubtful value.

There are a few notable exceptions to this state of things among school papers, but they serve only to bring into more painful relief the serious faults of the great majority. This kind of high-school paper is restricted to no one state or section of our country; in Massachusetts and New York, as well as in Wisconsin and Minnesota the same general characteristics obtain.

The possibilities.—Observations like those just described led the writer to an experiment which he thinks has been successful enough to suggest further development. The question which presented itself to me as principal of a high school was this: Can the possibilities for usefulness, which many high-school men see vaguely to exist in the high-school paper, be brought to actual accomplishment without an undue encroachment upon the time of the teacher? Can the high-school paper be made to yield the three results mentioned at the beginning of this article, namely, (1) a stimulus to literary composition; (2) an advertisement for the high school; (3) an aid to a proper school spirit?

Our high-school paper had just suffered one of its intermittent attacks of heart failure, and the student promoters of its resurrection had not yet organized. The circumstances were favorable for the first step, which I had decided must be a substitution of teacher control for student control. I wished to do

this, however, without any appearance of arbitrary usurpation of student privilege. In fact, I wanted student *coöperation* as against student *control*.

The editor of one of our local papers had several times intimated to the principal that he would welcome at any time items concerning the school, and one day I went to him with the following proposition: "We will agree to keep three half-columns of your paper filled each week with school news, provided you give us space on the first page, and that you give us a special heading of our own choice, with separate volume, number, and date lines." In other words, we wished to have a full fledged individual high-school paper within the regular local newspaper, sharing its circulation, going everywhere it went. The amount of space and prominent position asked for caused the local editor to hesitate at first; but when it was made clear to him that the new feature would increase the popularity of his paper with its patrons, and that more copies would be sold among pupils and their friends, the editor decided to try the experiment. Later in the year the three half-columns were lengthened to three three-quarter columns, some issues thus containing nearly as much reading matter—exclusive of advertisements—as many high-school journals. A most important consideration was that such a school paper would not cost the school a cent, and thus at one move was disposed of all the agony of canvassing and waste of time involved in meeting the weekly expenses of the old paper.

The principal at once assumed the duties of editor-in-chief, and a corp of reporters were appointed from the rhetoric class, with the understanding that they were to receive full credit in the department of English for all work appearing in the *Brodhead School Gazette*. The first issue contained a brief note of introduction, several "locals" pertaining to worthy school interests; and a column article headed "The Brodhead Telephone Company"—a "write up" by a pupil of the rhetoric class. The information was obtained at first hand by interviewing officials of the company and was the first complete account given to the citizens of the new plant. Following this was an account of the

Bi-weekly Teachers' Meeting, by a pupil delegated for that purpose from the rhetoric class. The next article was a plea for a new piano written also by a member of the rhetoric class. The next article, a column in length, was headed "An Evening at the Brodhead Choral Union," describing from personal observation the work of a new musical society in which many of the high-school pupils were interested.

This table of contents was quite different from that of the high-school papers before referred to, and it was a fair sample of the weekly issues that followed it. All of the articles were handed in for criticism to the teacher of rhetoric several days before their appearance in print and constituted a part of the regular composition assignments. A pupil was allowed to have his name, initials or simply the word "student" appear after the article. The simple "notes" of the reporter or interviewer were first handed in; these were gone over and the reporter had to vouch for his facts, and he was frequently sent out to verify a doubtful point or gain additional information. The two suggestions most frequently given the young writers were, "Make your statements *clear*," and "Make them *interesting*." No attempts were made to initiate great writers; we were glad and well content when the final draughts showed good spelling, intelligent punctuation and clear English.

This reporting method is the boys' method *par excellence*. Healthy boys proverbially dislike grammar and rhetoric. Rhetoric as ordinarily laid down in high-school texts is pedantic in its methods and terminology. Scholastic analysis of the language he speaks and reads is as foreign to a boy's natural interests as anything well could be.

A high-school rhetoric in wide use offers these choice morsels to the boys:

RULES FOR WORDS THAT HAVE MUTUAL REFERENCE

37. Prepare for an important alternative or inference by correlating connectives.

and

57. To make a clause or phrase rapid, give its substance in implication or by epithet.

By this time the boy's enthusiasm is eager for a climax :

92. Test a composite topic by the relation of its constituent ideas.

and

97. Put like modes of amplification together.

This array of high-sounding terms is disgusting to active youth, and demands for intelligent and sympathetic study, a brain far enough advanced for the reflective powers to dominate. In a girl of fourteen common observation and recent psychology show us such powers are developed to a considerable extent. Girls are naturally more interested in linguistic studies than are boys; they acquire abstractions more easily, and are rapid and fluent talkers as compared to boys. The boy can't sit down and "think up" a story and write it off as a girl can.

In the reporting method the boy is doing just what he knows hundreds of *men* all over the country are doing. The boy of high-school age takes naturally to newspaper reading; it is his first manifestation of "literary taste." As he reads the interesting accounts of battles, escapades, ball games, interviews, etc., occasional desires shoot through him to try his hand. He probably knows the reporters of the local and city papers; he wonders at their easy grasp of men and things. This form of literature has a real hold on his life and I believe it wise for education, as Professor James says, to make these native instincts its ally instead of its enemy.

But will not the reporter's style spoil the boy's literary taste? The answer is simple. The average boy hasn't any *literary* taste to spoil. Not one out of a thousand will ever become a producer of literature. Teachers are too apt to think that because they enjoy Emerson and Tennyson that the high-school boy does also—or ought to—and we arrange his work in English on the basis of what we think he *ought* to enjoy. Science has shown us how the great forces in nature accomplish their mighty results by moving along lines of least resistance—it is the natural method, and only when we place our instruction in the great currents of a boy's being can we make it really effective in his future living.

A too free use of slang in these reports would be blue-penciled—just as it would be in an editorial sanctum of the best newspapers; a repetition would be cut out to save space; a long and involved or obscure sentence would be divided up to make the article read easily. Bad mistakes in capitalization and punctuation make rewriting necessary. It is worse than useless to be pedantic as to the subtleties of capitalization and punctuation with high-school boys. Capitalization and punctuation that obtain in good current periodicals ought to be accepted. It is foolish and criminal to spoil a growing interest by tiresome and futile discussions on the “shall and will” bogie or the opinions of learned savants as to when “farther” shall be used, and when “further.” Why not insist on the few well-settled and universal laws of effective English? Attempts at fine writing after models from Burke and Macaulay is so much good time wasted.

On the other hand, girls, because of their advanced mental development, will frequently enjoy abstract essays and imaginative stories in addition to these reporter’s exercises, but even they can find pleasure and profit in writing up a lecture, concert, or society meeting. Pleas for school or town decoration and improvements of various kinds made effective by a presentation of existing unsatisfactory conditions, are within the interest and scope of girl reporters.

But there is a much broader function a high-school paper so conducted may serve. It may become a powerful instrument in the hands of the principal in forming public interest in matters of school reform. Where the separate high-school paper reaches one home, the local paper reaches twenty. The distinct high-school paper reaches a class of the community; the local newspaper reaches every class of the community, and the school paper within it may become the weekly bulletin of educational conditions as the weather forecasts are the daily bulletins of the movements of the atmosphere.

In these days of specialization, communities leave educational policies to the experts. The old days of visiting the district school to see whether or no the teacher can keep order, are passed. The school system has become an organized piece of

machinery—like the big factories, railroads or water works, in the presence of which the individual parent is beginning to feel his inadequacy. With his voice in the local paper, the principal can bring the conditions and needs of the school into nearly every home in the city. Indeed, I can see how a superintendent with good judgment and a ready pen may inaugurate a new method of educational propaganda, that may once again arouse the fervor of the old district school meetings, and it seems not unreasonable to hope that intelligent views on vital educational topics may become as widely diffused as those on pugilistic encounters in the neighborhood.

When we consider that these beneficent results to the community and to the English work of the school are obtained without expense, that there is no financial burden, no siege of soliciting, no waste of student energy, no anxiety and blushes for the product turned out, it would seem that educators have in this arrangement with the local press a most fortunate opportunity to secure at a minimum expenditure of time and money, the maximum amount of good training in the use of English for our boys and well-informed coöperation from the community. The time is ripe for the educators of the country to step in and give the movement now in progress direction and effectiveness.

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